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ABSTRACT

Secondary school educators are concerned with increasing parental involvement; raising attendance levels, grades, and test scores; reducing behavior problems; and improving the community's perceptions of the schools. This document is comprised of two brief articles. The first describes how to establish an Academic Booster Club to help accomplish the above goals. The booster club functions with parent, community, and staff support. Organizers should consider offering incentives that appeal to students and making activities helpful to both students and parents. The second article offers suggestions for improving school relations with the district office. As school-based management continues to be a trend, central office administrators and school staff roles need to be clarified. One way to bridge the gap is to improve the communication, trust, and understanding between the school and district office. It is recommended that meetings be arranged to inform teachers of the district-office staff's functions, with a focus on describing how they affect and can help the school. (LMI)

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Tips for Principals

from nassp

January 1996

How To ...

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Improve Relations Between the School and the District Office

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Tips for Principals

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...TO ...

Start an Academic Booster Club at Your School

Secondary school educators are concerned with increasing parental involvement; raising attendance levels, grades, and test scores; reducing behavior problems; and improving the community's perceptions of the schools. All these worthy goals can be helped dramatically by the establishment of an Academic Booster Club.

An Academic Booster Club functions as do other booster clubs—with parent, community, and staff support. Care must be taken to define the mission and establish achievable goals early, and the club's creation and maintenance, as with similar efforts, requires work and dedication.

Parents too often reduce their involvement in school when their students leave elementary school. This is unfortunate because adolescents need to have their parents involved in secondary school as much as they needed it in elementary school. The Academic Booster Club is a superlative way to reach a large number of parents, since most parents want to be involved in their children's academics. Athletic and other booster clubs are usually strong, but their "boost" is usually confined to a specific school population. An Academic Booster Club can reach virtually every student and parent in the school.

Many schools are finding that academic letter awards, patterned generally after athletic letter awards (and equally prized), work wonders with student achievement.

While students need to be and should be recognized for achievement in academics, attendance, testing, and conduct, they do not have to be honor roll students to be recognized. Students who improve or are trying to improve can also be recognized; such recognition should be schoolwide with special attention given to the honored students. Teenagers are very susceptible to peer influence; make it "cool" to be smart. Reward students for their efforts.

Academic Booster Clubs can raise money, gather appropriate items, and contribute to ceremonies. Celebrations become community as well as school affairs. Consider:

- ✓ Incentives that students appreciate include bumper stickers, certificates, clothing, credit cards for gifts or food, dances, meal(s) at local restaurants, pizza parties, preferred parking places, early lunch privileges,

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Improve Relations Between the School and the District Office

It is unfortunate that schools and district offices are so often pitted against each other, for poor relations are usually a result of insufficient understanding of what each group does for students. As site-based management and central office staff downsizing continue, a better understanding of their roles is needed.

The school district consolidation movement dominated education for much of the twentieth century. As a result, the average school district today has more than 3,000 students, compared with a 1930s mean district size of 200 (Guthrie, 1979). Years ago the central office staff viewed themselves as policy and decisionmakers; today they must view themselves as leaders who help initiate improvement efforts and involve others in those efforts (Whitaker and Moses, 1994). In the cost cutting 1990s, school district offices are also expected to do more with less. "The district office staff which previously made decisions for schools must now provide information and support services ... " (Bliss, Firestone, and Richards, 1991, p. 180).

Rarely do the school and the central office communicate except from the top down and then usually through memos to the principal. Supervision and policies once dictated *to* schools are now being formulated and processed *at* schools. Many principals are unclear regarding this power shift and it is reasonable to assume that most teachers are equally unclear.

Sigband and Bell (1989) contend that the purposes of communication are to be understood exactly as intended, to secure the desired responses, and to maintain favorable relations with those with whom one communicates. One way to bridge the gap is to improve the communication, trust, and understanding between the school and the district office. Supervision is best in an atmosphere of trust (McQuade and Champagne, 1995).

Teachers want and need to know the many functions of the district office staff; among other topics, they are interested in:

- ✓ *Special Education:* Laws, policies, inclusion of students, and district policy regarding special education students
- ✓ *Curriculum/Instruction:* Subject supervisor roles, classroom observation, evaluation/assessment of learning, district curriculum guide, and text selection process
- ✓ *Student Services:* Student behavior and alternative policies and programs

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EA 027 437

Academic Booster Club, *continued ...*

lunch off campus with parents, ribbons, school items, student of the week/month status, tickets to sports events, weekly prize drawings, etc.

✓ The Academic Booster Club can be informative and helpful to both students and parents. It can help arrange for career days and fairs; college financial aid programs; guidance programs; college visits; and testing, study, and tutoring programs.

✓ Parents increase their involvement in the school as they become active in the club. They can raise funds, serve as chaperones, tutor, volunteer in school, write newspaper articles, and foster good public relations.

The image of the school in the community improves as the program evolves and as parents and businesses become involved in academics even beyond other cocurricular programs.

Academic Booster Clubs have been successfully established all over the country, and the uniqueness of each school and community provides unlimited opportunities for creative involvement. Over a two-year period, for example, one rural southern middle school experienced:

- The Academic Booster Club raised more than $20,000.
- The state recognized the school's improvements and awarded the school $23,000 in incentives.
- The average daily attendance rose to 96 percent.
- Fifty percent of the 900-student population had perfect attendance every nine weeks.
- Achievement test scores exceeded the district average.
- Students maintained a 2.6 GPA (out of a 4.0).
- Twenty-five percent of the students made the honor roll each quarter.
- The retention rate decreased to .015 percent.
- Parental involvement greatly increased.
- Newspaper articles went from non-existent or negative to frequent and positive.
- New business partnerships were established.
- Students became more involved in community projects.
- The number of eighth grade state junior scholars increased from 5 to 25.
- More than 200 students were actively involved in a college study group held during and after school.
- The requirements for admission and the number of students in the National Junior Honor Society rose.
- Student behavior improved as students wanted to be rewarded for good behavior.
- Community participation and appreciation greatly improved.

The message is clear: starting an Academic Booster Club at your school can bring tremendous rewards.

School and District Office Relations, *continued ...*

✓ *Maintenance/Facilities:* Who does what, who pays, and when work can start

✓ *Business/Finance:* How to develop a budget, school funds, and why we get what we get

✓ *Personnel:* Staff allocation, hiring/termination procedures, and documentation.

These and many other topics can be discussed, and staff members' input as to what should be presented and by whom is important. Presenters are effective when they give overviews of their positions, of how they affect the school, and of what they can do to help the school. Overheads, handouts, and discussions have positive results when used properly.

The school staff can schedule the session(s) during teacher workdays, preservice workdays, faculty meetings, PTA meetings, etc. There should be sufficient time for questions and answers and to address teachers' concerns. An open exchange of ideas, problems, and concerns should lead to a better understanding of both organizations, help resolve misunderstandings, and provide a forum that leads to improved education.

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